



# Home Altars: Material Expressions of Spiritual Do-It-Yourself

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## Abstract

This article is based on a study of home altars of believers who practice heterodox spiritualities. I refer to different kinds of spiritualities that are developed outside the ecclesiastical structures, which do not have dogmas, nor unique leaderships, although they participate in networks around ceremonies that guide their learning and their identity. Among these heterodox spiritualities we can locate spiritualities around nature (neopaganism); esoteric spiritualities linked to initiation schools; feminine spiritualities that are oriented by the sacralization of feminine nature; neo shamanic spiritualities, or linked to some ancestral rescue search or to an indigenous lineage. The article argues the relevance of the study of the altars and the material objects there arranged to be practiced attending the material side of the spirituality in the lived religiosity. The article argues the relevance of the study of the altars and the material objects there arranged to be practiced attending the material side of the spirituality in the lived religiosity.

**Keywords** Altars · Lived religion · Spirituality · Materiality's

The first time I came across the symbolic richness of heterodox altars was more than 20 years ago when I conducted an interview around the eclectic altar of Mary, which at that time practiced a New Age spirituality, incorporating different elements of the spiritual traditions of the East (she studied Kundalini yoga and was a follower of Gurumayi Chidvilasananda) which she combined with some aspects of her Catholic culture and other Indo-American traditions with shamanic roots. It was she who revealed to me the importance of her altar in order to communicate and experience an intimate, dynamic, fluid and spontaneous spirituality that would not be manifest anywhere else, because as Mary described it, it was a reflection of her inner self:

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It expresses what I am, my beliefs, my spiritual and religious interior. It is a manifestation of the sacred because I am part of the sacred. I am also sacred. It came up spontaneously; it is something very personal, and I do not do it because in the groups I attend they are used to making altars. For me it is a rich tradition that allows me to continually remember what is sacred for me. (De la Torre 2012:188).

At that time, I realized that the personal altar of Mary was a do-it-yourself of beliefs and affections, referred to with the inner search and religious identification. Her bricolage was unique, as was her menu of spirituality a la carte. The description of each element placed on her domestic altar allowed me to enter into the believing subjectivity of Mary; and to understand that her trajectory as a spiritual seeker could be shaped, that is, objectified, in the very act of assembling a self-altar. This is how I defined it:

The altar of Mary is an iconographic expression of her interior. We can appreciate through its description that the objects that come from different religious traditions do not reach a synthesis, they do not carry a religious syncretism, but they are juxtaposed maintaining each one the value given by its tradition of origin. On the altar of Mary the experience is staged in a synchronic way, we do not find a hierarchy among the elements that make it up (De la Torre 2012:192).

I discovered that, through the description of her altar, Mary could communicate her experience to me, and I could agree to recognize the logic with which she put together her own believing (Photos 1, 2 and 3).

Many (unaffiliated) spiritual seekers who have decided to leave the churches to venture into their own encounter with the sacred, divine or supernatural undertake a personal journey through alternative circuits in which they experience, learn and collect



**Photo 1** Economy Altar, by R de la Torre, Guadalajara, May 21 2018



**Photo 2** Ixchell eco-alternatives altar, by R de la Torre, Guadalajara, June 25 2018

symbolic goods from different traditions, which they select, arrange and store as meaningful learnings to assemble their own spiritual story, or as Champion and Hervieu-Léger (1990) have called it their own *a la carte menu of spirituality*. By means of rituals and narratives that provide justification and coherence, they accommodate in their personal experience the different pieces collected in different workshops and ceremonies, and they are creatively assembling a personalized narrative and self-explanation of their own spirituality (Orsi 1997).

As mentioned by Brigit Meyer (2019), many times it is thought that alternative spiritualities or those denominated as New Age have an “anti-materialist” characteristic



**Photo 3** The “temazcalero” altar, by R de la Torre Guadalajara, May 31 2018

(some authors pointed out the rejection of materialistic consumption); but this does not imply that to assume oneself as spiritual is a rejection of all objects, to which—as we will see—a spirit or an animistic character is generally attributed. Unlike Catholic altars that contain supernatural images with human features, spiritualized materialities are generally natural symbols and natural artifacts (from bird feathers, power flats, special stones such as quartz or obsidian. Also, ritual or therapeutic instruments that generate well-being: wheels of time, pyramids, medicinal substances, native musical instruments, therapeutic work instruments).

During the field work (November 2018–October 2020), I was able to record that, like Maria (Kundalini Yoga teacher), most of those who practice these heterodox spiritualities<sup>1</sup> have special surfaces (sometimes they can be tables, a bookcase or desk) where they have placed diverse objects considered special or different from the rest of the artifacts that are in the house, since they have been consecrated, practiced and are accompanied by offerings (water, incense, flowers, seeds) and even live with very dear family items (drawings, photographs of absent beings, or of ascended masters).

### Why Is It Important to Study the Altars?

The study of altars was chosen because I consider them to be material assemblages of the experience of the sacred that create spatial and temporal predispositions for personal spiritual worship and practice. As Ammerman notes: “everyday lives are structures around material places and objects, a physical environment that is often arranged as meaningful setting for life” (Ammerman 2007: 15).

The conception of altars is as broad as it is conceived, or rather, as it is experienced by its practitioners. I do not start from a substantive definition of what an altar should be linked to an established religious tradition. On the contrary, it is the practitioners who define that their sacred corner can be an altar. The research criterion recovers the stance adopted by lived religion studies of seeking to discover what people do as religious and not what an altar should be according to doctrinal or theological ecclesial positions (Ammerman 2007). This functional rather than substantive stance generates “a new look at material culture, asking us to consider not what a thing is but rather what it does” (Molina 2017: 258).

Therefore, the study of altars can be functionally defined as installations in which the selection criteria of the objects placed there provoke or evoke a sacred or transcendent relationship; and added to this, they configure spaces around which a ritual practice is carried out and a religious experience is lived. This allows us not to limit the type of object or materiality, and at the same time to distinguish altars from artistic or even political installations. For example, there can be an artistic installation that has devotional figures as its central objects and—because of its function is aesthetic—it can be practiced as such. Or on the contrary, an altar can be so regardless of the objects (neither by quantity nor by origin) as long as it generates experiences and practices

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<sup>1</sup> I use the term heterodox spiritualities (used by Wright and Ceriani 2018) because they do not correspond to the mainstream religions, since they are anti-dogmatic and subaltern. Therefore, they represent alternatives to hegemonic religious beliefs and practices (for example, in America they are Christian) and have a character of disagreement with institutionalized practices, their forms of authority, their dogmas and traditions.

considered sacred or transcendent. When contacting the interviewees, they were notified that the interview was about altars, and they were the ones who defined their assemblies (regardless of the size or the number of objects present) as altars, although sometimes they said: I have something that can be considered as an altar.

Altars are the product of a do-it-yourself spirituality. One of the elements I wish to develop in this article is the material manifestation of spirituality. In undertaking this study of altars,<sup>2</sup> I discovered in informal surveys that those subjects who practice heterodox, non-institutionalized, and in their own way spiritualities told me that they had altars in their homes. When I approached to study them, I discovered that, unlike Catholic altars that revolve around miraculous images,<sup>3</sup> theirs have very different objects (swords, stones, feathers, plants, wheels of time, symbols of femininity, objects of power, essences, etc.), which have been selected to build a daily communication between home and transcendence, to build a sacred time and space in their daily lives, and to generate an awareness of their own worldview. These objects usually do not have a commercial exchange value, but they do have a sacred use value.

The study of altars allows us to highlight the materialized dimension of contemporary spiritualities, which according to Taylor (2007) represent a new socially established form of experiencing the religious in late or postmodern society. This consists of a religiosity of each one (James 1986); more experienced and centered in the inner spirituality (Heelas 1996); individualized and less attached to institutional structures (Hervieu-Léger 1996), and which has as its central bias an autonomous and anti-authoritarian character (Carozzi 1999:2). Invisible, because it has been privatized, and is no longer visible in public spaces, that is, it has left the temples (Luckman 1967). Hybrid, because it is a selective religiosity, made with pieces of different religious and philosophical traditions (Hervieu-Léger 1996). Sensitive because it recreates less normative emotional forms that contribute to authenticate the beliefs in the motto: “because I felt it” (Mardones 1994) and because they are less cognitive and essentially sensory experience (McGuire 2016). And holistic because it conceives the part as the whole, and the whole as a part of the universe (Amaral 1999).

I consider the altars as the result of the material objectification of believing subjectivities. There is no formula for setting up an altar but do-it-yourself logic. Each altar contains material elements of various kinds that have been selected and placed in a special assembly. During life, individuals relate to millions of objects. Some pass through their hands to be later discarded. A few others deserve to be preserved. And a few less are those that were chosen to be placed in a special and visible place like the altar. Therefore, the objects placed there have a special meaning for that individual (sacred, transcendent, evocative, commemorative, emotional or power).

Harris considers that: “Consciousness is adapted to practical and worldly conditions. These conditions cannot be imagined in or out of existence in the way that a shaman makes hundred-foot-long midges appear and disappear” (Harris 1989: 217). In this sense, the consciousness of the divinity, of the sacred, of the transcendent, is not found

<sup>2</sup> The findings described here are the result of the project “The religiosity of daily life through the altars in the city of Guadalajara.” The research began in 2018. The project includes the study of Catholic altars; of heterodox, esoteric spiritualities and magic-popular cults. Only the altars outside the temples are studied. For this article, I will only develop what concerns heterodox spiritualities.

<sup>3</sup> About the Catholic altars, I recommend reading the article of De la Torre y Salas 2020, which is accompanied by a photo gallery.



outside their conditions of life, but present in it. From there they acquire coherence and a sense of unity.

Although altars are a little studied tradition, it is one of the most practiced religious activities in Mexico. It is a multi-religious activity (it is present in Christianity, Hinduism, Confucianism, Buddhism, in the religions of African roots and in the Indo-American cults, as well as in the new esoteric schools and the emerging heterodox spiritualities). It is also a multicultural and multiethnic tradition. It not only corresponds to one social class but is also transclass. For all these reasons, it makes it possible to deal with religious materiality and rituals outside of institutions and consecrated places in a comparative way. The altars are not an exclusive tradition of some religion, they are older than Christianity. It is a practice that is also present in many traditions that have an iconographic support: pagan (around elements of nature); in ancient civilizations (Aztec, Maya, Inca, Greek Egyptian, Phoenician); in Eastern religions and philosophies (Buddhism, Islam, Confucianism and Zionists), in iconographic Catholicism (both official within churches, and in popular religiosity around the saints); in the religions of African roots (Rule of Ocha or Santería, Candomblé, umbanda, voodoo); in the esoteric fraternities, among the Mormons; and even among the practitioners of holistic spiritualities. Therefore, its study allows us to compare and address a range of believers from different traditions.

According to data reported by the ENCREER Survey, RIFREM 2016 (see Hernández et al. 2016),<sup>4</sup> in Mexico 54.8% of those surveyed responded that they had a religious altar at home. This data places it as the religious practice that is most carried out among Mexicans. It exceeds the attendance at daily and weekly mass (11% say they go daily and 44% weekly) that takes place inside the temples; and the practice of attending annual pilgrimages to shrines (51%) and reading the Bible (52%). It should be noted that the altars are present in the daily life of more than two thirds of the Catholic population (63.6%)—which is the majority in Mexico: according to the 2010 census, 83% of the population says they are Catholic. But it is also present in 8.6% of those who defined themselves as “without religion.” In 2010, the unaffiliated population represented 4.7% of the national population; and according to census data for 2020, it was the category that increased the most, reaching 10.6% (INEGI available at <https://www.inegi.org.mx/>). The last census for first time distinguished between those “without religion” (8.1%) and “believers without a church” (2.5%). The latter is the sector where the practitioners of spiritualities without institutional affiliation or by free choice are registered (INEGI available at <https://censo2020.mx/>).

The interviewees to whom I resort in this article concerned to “believers without belonging,” or spirituals without a church (Davie 1994), which includes people who maintain beliefs and practices related to the supernatural but do not belong to a church.

<sup>4</sup> In the survey of beliefs, practices, and values in Guadalajara conducted in 2016, we found that the majority (57%) of the inhabitants say they have an altar at home (see Gutiérrez Zúñiga and De la Torre 2020: 87). Since the majority of the population is Catholic (92%), it is also the majority that the altars are dedicated to figures of virgins and saints, with a special predilection for the Virgin of Guadalupe. In the survey, due to the minority condition of non-affiliates or other religions, it is impossible to capture the presence of altars outside the Catholic sphere. But the tradition is so deep-rooted that it supposes a thread of memory to sustain a freer and more autonomous spirituality as heterodox spiritualities are.

Continuing the same survey, domestic altars are present in all socioeconomic strata, although with a predominance among the middle sectors.

## Research Proposal

As claimed by the editors of the journal *Material Religion* (available at <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.2752/174322005778054474>) at the launch of its first issue, religion is not just an abstract issue to be found in doctrine and dogma. It is not limited to the sermon or the reasons, but it is also an experience that is lived with the body and in the spaces where it is inhabited in the day to day (Meyer et al. 2010). From this perspective, these authors define religion as that which ordinary people (without having to be priests) do with material things and in ordinary places that are not temples.

Domestic altars generate devotional spaces that reveal the spiritual agency of everyday subjects and the most intimate way of their links with figures, objects, artifacts or sacred substances. Altars make up spaces that, as Suárez points out, are “for the free exercise of religious creativity” (2015: 120). The altars require daily care and are activated through ritual practices: offerings, prayers, songs, body techniques, aromas and objects alluding to the venerated beings.

Kay Turner conducted a study of altars among the Mexican population in Texas and concluded that they are significant because

(...) the home altars index a folk-religion ideal of relationship in its aesthetic of accumulation, layering, condensation, and integration. Items of both a sacred and secular nature are accumulated. On the altar they stand in relation to each other, and in overall composition each item resonates with all the other; the combination and association of items tend to increase the potency of any individual (Turner 2008:183).

It is important to recognize that altars are not definitive creations, but unfinished stagings that can be modified over time. Similar to how Hoffman-Hussaim (2015) analyzes artifacts accumulated in a basement, the theme of altars works:

Household artifacts represent how belonging changes in meaning, according to different phases of life and social contexts. Therefore, religious artifacts in the home are performative objects. As such, they convey aspects of individual or shared belonging within the domestic sphere and play an important role in interfaith belonging within the couple (Hoffman-Hussaim 2015: 159).

The methodology is based on an interview that focuses on the history of the altar itself, and on the biography of each object that is placed on the domestic altar. The idea of the history of the objects is truly relevant because it is linked to the changes and the different phases of the religious or spiritual path of the subject. For this section, we take up again the methodological contributions of Appadurai (1991) to address the value of use framed in the value given through ritual practice, which does not reside in the object itself, because like other cultural goods (such as the goods studied by Appadurai 1991), it has a biography of

mutation. It is important, therefore, to pay attention to the biography of the altar and the objects that make up the altar and to examine its trajectory (how it got there) in order to understand when an object becomes a sacred or special object and when it stops being one (Kopitoff 1991).

In addition, it seeks to recognize the value that is imprinted on each of the objects selected on the altar; the ritual use with which they are practiced by their owners and users; the agency or powers that are recognized for the objects; the communicative experiences that are established through them, the sensations that they transmit, the valuable memories that they recreate or arouse, and so on. Finally, attention is paid to the performativity of the objects since they transform spaces and times.

## Methodology

The aim of this research has been to look at the altar as a material projection of the believer's inner world: his religious biography, his beliefs, the relationship of the altar to his daily problems and aspirations, and the search for solutions to them. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with those in charge of the altars at the place where their altars are located. The interviews were conducted between 2018 and 2020 with practitioners of diverse and heterodox spiritualities, and the snowball technique was used. The informants were chosen with the intention of detecting a qualitative representation of a wide range of possibilities of the practice, and do not represent type cases or regularities. The objective, then, is to give an account of the heterogeneity of altars, subjects, and practices that give an account of the internal differentiation of this practice. The project combines photography with a semi-structured interview script.

The technique is based on open interviews with the owners of the altars, who are asked to describe the history of the altar, its inscription in a tradition, and then to talk about each element that is present in it: the biography of the object, the associated meanings, the rituals and communicational activities that are practiced around the altar, its relationship with the supernatural, the aesthetics that confer emotional or sensory states, etc. In short, it seeks to recreate, from the words of its practitioners, the sacred, practical, and everyday meaning of the religious experience lived daily with objects considered sacred or special.

Unlike conventional methods, the interviews do not deal with the believing subjects, but rather with the biography of the sacred objects that are present on the altars in their homes, and around the religiosity lived around the altars. The instrument focused on the objects, instruments, artifacts, spaces, plants, and minerals that are the material references of the personal way in which each interviewee practices such spirituality on a daily basis. Each one was asked to describe the altar, to talk about the history of their altar and of each one of the objects placed there. The themes addressed were the emotional relationship with the objects, the ritual activities performed around the altar, and the meaning and value given to each of the pieces placed on the altar. It will be a matter of recognizing the meanings, functions, powers, forces, or agencies that the interviewees attribute to the objects: the sacred sense, the source that consecrates the objects, the daily rituals that they perform, the processes of authentication and consecration of the objects, the magical, power or energetic agency of the objects, the



communicative function with the supernatural, the emotional charge that connects with their vital cosmos, and finally, the sensitive and emotional experiences that are lived in relation to them.

Through the descriptions of the altars, the aim is to know the way in which materiality projects the intimate world of beliefs and subjectivities through a stylistic installation that allows them to exteriorize, materialize, and put into practice their spiritual world. In addition to the interviews, the altars and objects were photographed to capture their aesthetic features, considering that aesthetics comply with the persuasive competition that activates corporal sensations (Meyer 2018). The photographs document the place they occupy in the domestic space, the arrangement of objects on the altar; the offerings that represent the votive sense of this practice linked to seeking spiritual help to solve everyday problems. Considering that aesthetics meets the persuasive competence that activates bodily sensations (Meyer 2018), the photographic records of a variety of altars were incorporated into the methodology, to capture the way objects are treated: what place is given to them in the space where they are placed, what arrangement the figures have on the altar; and what is offered to them in order to understand the votive sense of this practice linked to seeking spiritual help to solve everyday problems and for those are the altars: to ask for help and solutions to everyday problems, to find comfort or wellness.

For this essay, I selected only three interviews—out of a total of 25—conducted with practitioners of domestic altars to try to explain and understand the material and everyday elements with which they express a spirituality made to their measure. The selection of cases aims to represent a wide range of subjects who through the practice of their altars materialize the main elements that make up a subjective universe of a spirituality in its own way.

## The Altar-Consultancy of a Shaman: Working Instruments

Ignacio Hernández is 64 years old.<sup>5</sup> He works as a gestalt therapist. In his office, where he receives his patients, he has assembled an altar that takes up space on the shelves of a modular piece of furniture. In it, he has placed the instruments of power with which he performs the work for his patients: stones, plants, incense, tarot cards, figures of saints and oriental deities. He combines different elements of metaphysical philosophy, esotericism, shamanism, and Gestalt therapy. He mainly works with crystals that come from Germany. This technique is known as “Crystal therapy.” He uses the crystals to harmonize the chakras and thus help his patients get out of stress:

It is supposed that these crystals vibrate at such a high frequency, that they achieve the purpose of balancing the emotions and feelings of the human being, this is what I have been working with for the last six seven years, but also within some courses I also learned how to handle quartz, quartz for massaging and I learned how to massage with hot stones, with the same quartz yes, there are also some, someone designed some crystals to be able to massage the physical body and achieve the objectives of relaxation.

<sup>5</sup> The interview took place in Guadalajara, Mexico, on July 3, 2018.

In addition, his technique is based on the knowledge learned from metaphysics, esotericism, and Gestalt therapy. Throughout his adult life, Ignacio learned different techniques to provide his patients with well-being and, as he says, he introduced them to create his own therapeutic offer, which he recognizes as holistic.<sup>6</sup> The knowledge that he handles has to do with essences, candles, incense. Together these elements are used to help relax his patients.

In the interview in front of his altar, Ignacio remembers that he was dedicated to music and it was in that artistic environment where he met people who were dedicated to de-stressing artists. There were fortune tellers, people who read hands, massage therapists. From there, his interest in these matters was born. He tells that one of his fellow musicians gave him a little book by Cony Méndez<sup>7</sup> that introduced him to metaphysical philosophy and, from there, he began his studies at the metaphysical school of Mexico, located in Mexico City. There he studied several esoteric currents and later continued his career complementing it with diploma courses. Later he developed as a teacher of the course of miracles within the philosophy of metaphysics. One of the courses that most influenced him was shamanism, in which he learned to handle some instruments (some stones, crystals, plants and braziers to handle aromatherapy and perform energetic cleansings with copal). These instruments are the objects that are present in his altar. They have a sacred value because they are the tools that shamans and medicine men use to clean energies. He also trained in other courses he took at the House of Harmony for six years and later opened his practice and began working as a holistic therapist.

Ignacio's altar maintains an order where objects are grouped according to the classification of the work done with them. In a modular piece of furniture with three sections he has divided his objects: on the left side are his reference books, in the center he has placed the instruments he uses for therapy; and in the third he has assembled "an altar to economy," as he called it.

The "braceros," "sahumadores," and "incenciaros" that he uses for his therapies are important instruments because he works with aromatherapy (the braceros come from different pre-Hispanic indigenous traditions: Mayan, Huichol, Aztec, in addition to one that he brought from Nepal, India). He explains that the incense of different plants, and the burning of charcoal are meant to channel the spiritual world. They allow contact with the spiritual part and to be able to download information. This learning is taken from the healers and shamans who by lighting plants and coals established a spiritual

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<sup>6</sup> The same ritual practice can be considered in its holistic sense of connection (as a source of positive energies, as an activator of flows, a generator of vibrations, an opener of spiritual fields, etc.) that reactivates the connection between the inner self, nature and the cosmos; or the spirit, mind and body. That is why many of the projects with the New Age seal are defined as holistic health, holistic alternative therapies, holistic environmentalism, holistic education, holistic training centers, holistic healing, etc. (De la Torre 2014: 43).

<sup>7</sup> Cony Méndez was a Venezuelan writer whose books on metaphysics influenced the development of esoteric schools in Latin America. She was the founder of the Brotherhood of Saint Germain: "a widespread contemporary esoteric school whose doctrine is said to derive from ancient teachings of medieval alchemy attributed to Saint Germain—a historical character with mythical features—as well as from Helena Blavatsky's Theosophy and hybrid cosmological principles from the New Age's eclectic movement. It stresses individual spiritual development through certain meditation techniques oriented toward the unfolding of the inner divine self, named the "I Am" (Lavazza and Wright 2015).

communication with the spiritual entities or brought or lowered energy or power in order to help heal people.

On another shelf is placed a sword that he uses along with some prayers, and other objects that he considers symbols of healing power. On another shelf he has a bell that was given to him and that he uses to move energies through sound. On another shelf he has placed stones, some symbols, and even little pictures of saints to which he recognizes a power to channel energy. He considers that through these objects it is possible to channel information of spirituality to achieve healings.

Ignacio explains each of the central objects on his altar:

Look what you have here in front is a stone, a geode crystal. This geode, together with this snake, I use them, above all, to scare the children, because children are very easy to be scared by thunder, or by a scream from their mother when she is very stressed, or by the blow that their father has already given them, and then it becomes difficult for them to sleep. The way I use it is: you put the child in bed, on his back. You put some oils that are anti-stress. You put those oils on his nose, temple and neck, and you put this geode on the right side and guide him through a meditation. You guide him so that he can connect even with his guardian angel or have positive thoughts, thoughts of very healthy, very innocent children. By means of the meditation they are taken to a garden, they are placed or they are urged that they can play with their favorite toys and finally because it is made that the boy makes contact with his spiritual part and finally the fright leaves.

Most of the instruments used in the therapies are crystals (quartz), flower essences, oils, plants (myrrh, copal and incense) and minerals that are accompanied by a guidance through a meditation. He explains that the power of these objects resides in that: “they have been previously ritualized by medicine men of different indigenous traditions, Mayan and/or Huichol or Marak’ate people or shamans, which is how the wise men of the community are called.”

Throughout his history, Ignacio contacted different shamans in Mexico and learned from them their knowledge and asked them to bless his instruments so that he could later use them as a means of healing. Sometimes they are used for healing, sometimes to create a relaxing atmosphere for holistic massages, or to perform energetic cleanings in homes or businesses. For example, for the cleanings of spaces they take a smoke that they use to “pass the smoke through the whole house to move all the energy of the house or business to place it somewhere and from there take it out to the street, send it to the universe, to the cosmos, and this is how they achieve a cleaning of the house or business.”

The incense taken from the indigenous cultures has different perfumes that are used according to the needs and purposes of the healing. It reveals that:

The smoke from burning copal is energy and has the virtue of moving people’s energies. Together with a black candle and a virgin quartz you pull all that energy from people and take them out of their aura. Yes! because the energies are handled in the auric realm. The aura is an energy that we all count on, it’s about an inch away from the physical body, but that energy covers you. In fact, there is an instrument called Kirlian that when you take the picture you see your aura and

you can interpret how you might feel in that moment, and observe what would be the internal organ that would be manifesting a disease.

It has other pieces that are protective. One of them is a puma's head covered with chaquira; it is a handcrafted piece made by the Huichols who consider the puma as a powerful protector. The images of Catholic saints are also there as protectors. He says that when his patients go they feel calm and ask him:

What is here that feels so good? And it's because in my office all the time the energy is moving, all the time it's clearing up because I have cases of people who come in with very strong conflicts and their energy stays. In the clean ones that I do, that energy has to be taken out. I also use as protectors the figure of Shiva, an Indian goddess, the figure of Buddha and Confucius, who is a sage. All these figures that I have here are protections for me and they also protect the patients.

In his altar-repice he has also placed some medals that have been given to him as recognition for the works he has done. Ignacio does not belong to any specific religion, but he does feel part of networks and communities:

I belong to a community in Merida. I was blessed in that community and I was also given recognition. This foundation is called Kinich Ahau, which in Mayan means god of the sun. I maintain constant contact with them, and whenever there is a ritual they let me know so I can attend. In those they give thanks to the earth. They also come to assist with work at the Ixtépete [archaeological ruins near Guadalajara city]. On Earth Days we do a simultaneous ritual in Merida at the Ixtépete and others in other parts of Mexico. We do a large ritual, all in communication, at the same time, in different places. The biggest event that the community has carried out has been "the planetary transfiguration" which consisted of a ritual work to transform the energy to the earth, also in that moment the ceremony was done to thank the earth, but also took a whole ritual to make that transfiguration in 2008 because an energy came, because an energy portal was opened, and took advantage of that portal was opened and that energy fell on the earth to make a transformation of energy across the planet. All the other rituals have been to receive the seasons of the year, the day of the earth, which is the 3rd of May for the west is the 22nd of April. Offerings are taken, fruit is taken, quartz is taken, holes are made and quartz, candles, fruit is buried as a thank you to the earth. Normally I take my medal, which is the recognition of the congregation. I always take my protector who is a caller of angels. I take my portfolio to do my work, there I bring incense from different ones and I bring my protections... my angel caller, and this is my ring that I use as protection. It is worn on the little finger. I carry holy water with some essences and it expands. I also carry a copal bar in my hand and I spread it when I feel or perceive very dense energy, then I move it and at the end I place it in my quartz that has all the power, because there all the energy is placed, I take it out and all that goes away.

The images work as protections and are very important for your daily life because you work with dense and negative energies, which constantly contaminate you. He learned in the shamanism courses that he has to take care of himself, because otherwise he brings the negative energy with him and this can make him sick, convulse, or lose concentration, sleep or appetite: “these energies can cause you a mental disorder, it is strong, because here in my office I have had to do evictions of people who come possessed.”

On his altar shelf he also has the books that are his guide to work. In addition, he has written the prayers he requires for each job. The book he considers “my Bible” is *A Course in Miracles*, which his teacher gave him to study so that he could graduate as a shaman:

She told me that she will study it and that it will be my school. When I finished it, we made a contact with spirituality in a meditation and there she asked me to graduate. Also, with her I had the opportunity to contact my angel, to ask questions through meditation. That’s what angeologists do, to help people contact their angel. Well in part, they can also channel to answer questions from their patients, that way they help them.

For the past three years, he has been giving consultations by reading cards. In order to read them he has to ask permission from the spiritual beings, otherwise he has no powers to read. He calls his cards “my little angels.” And he explains that the deck is not a deck of tarot cards, but a deck of cards personalized for him. And he adds: “These are my cards that I always work with this cross, which is the symbol of our older brother Jesus, the Christ, and I always work them this way, (the cross on the cards). This is how I channel information, through your help. The cross is what gives me permission to access the information I am going to give.”

Ignacio does not charge a fixed fee for consultations. He asks for a voluntary donation for his work. For this same reason he has named what he calls the “Economy Altar.” There, “his money is empowered.” He designed and invented his altar. He placed quartz to multiply the money and he claims that it works, because:

Below is a dollar bill, which is the American currency and was esoterically worked. That’s why it’s so successful. The idea of placing the dollar bills is important because the people who designed the bill are Masons and have some Masonic symbols and it was ritualized to make it successful. These are some stones, they are these quartzes. This is a stone that is called “citrine” which is considered to be the one that attracts economy or economic fluidity. People have to believe in order for this to finally happen, load up, there are smaller stones, smaller crystals, putting a citrine in the bag will take care of your economy and make your economy flow. This is the major quartz, it is the quartz of economy, of money. And these are quartz for people to leave with the power, with the potential of the money that they left here as a voluntary payment.



## The Collective Altar of the Ixchel Women's Circle

Narda Solorzano is 32 years old. She is originally from Tala, Jalisco, and lives in Guadalajara. She coordinates a sacred femininity circle called Ixchel eco-alternativas.<sup>8</sup> “The colectiva” as she refers to it in feminine, is dedicated to promoting sexual health and self-awareness of the female body. The collective is made up of a circle of women of about ten members who carry out diverse activities that we can define as neo-pagan<sup>9</sup> such as fire dances, sacred songs, herbalist workshops, gynecology, feminine health, body movement through oriental techniques: Tai Chi, Chi Kung, and yoga. All her ritual and body practices seek to reconnect with the spirituality and feminine energy. We can define the collective as “Gendered spirituality involves an ongoing process of mind-body-spirit practice by which the individual’s gender self-identify can be expressed, produced, and transformed” (McGuire 2008: 147). The spirituality of sacred femininity has been resignifying and resymbolizing the rituals of Neo-Mexicanity (De la Torre 2018). The feminine circles seek to create new representations of femininity through spiritual rituals that foster the physical experience of “gendered spiritualities” (Pike 2001; Fedele and Knibbe 2013). The goal is: “Creating a space for women to get to know themselves by sharing with other women but also a space for individual awareness in which a woman understands her place in the social, spiritual and biological realm-where the biological is particularly related to a woman’s hormonal cycles (...)” (Ramírez 2017: 8).

The house where Narda lives is also a workspace. The collective Ixchel eco alternativas has a room at the entrance of the house that is used as a meeting point for the various women who are part of the project. The idea of setting up an altar there came about five years ago. Previously, the women converged in dance ceremonies around the fire, linked to the Red Path tradition,<sup>10</sup> which were held in the forest, on the outskirts of Guadalajara. They retake ancestral knowledge and wisdom from the Mayas, Wixarrikas (huicholes) and wisdom from Central and South America. Previously, the altars were assembled at each ceremony and dismantled when it was finished and each one took their objects home. They consisted of a mat on which each of the women who attended placed something representing the four elements of nature, such as a small stone, an image representing fire, the “copalera” (a clay cup where copal is burned), the sahumeros (incense cup), corn seeds, water, etc. But after the ceremony

<sup>8</sup> The interview took place in Guadalajara, Mexico, on June 25, 2018.

<sup>9</sup> Neo-paganism means a New Age reworking of a paganism based on the sacralization and re-enchantment of Nature, on the worship of ancient pre-Christian gods with emphasis on female divinities, and on the rescue of ancient cultures and spiritualities. Neo-paganism is a cosmopolitan reformulation of a spirituality of re-enchantment of nature and the cosmos.

<sup>10</sup> Red Path is a Native American spiritual movement that is structured as a global polycentric network (York 2009). Its main characteristics are the rescue of indigenous knowledge for the spiritual reconnection with Mother Earth (or Pachamama), with the ancestors and with the sacred femininity. The Red Path is also a school of neo-shamanic initiation. It can be characterized as a neo-pagan slope, emerged in the American continent, which resignifies the ethnic identities as panindianist knowledge, mainly by putting into circulation the shamanic knowledge and the ceremonies around the ingestion of power plants. The Red Path constitutes at present an important circuit of initiation and spiritual encounter in the global network of seekers of alternative and holistic spiritualities in therapeutic networks and personal knowledge, especially linked to neoshamanism, to psychonautic circuits (see De la Torre 2015, and on the feminization of the Red Path see De la Torre 2018).

there was no continuity, and they lost the link. So, they decided to found a circle of women, and attached to it a permanent collective altar.

The place where the altar was mounted is precisely in this room adapted for office use, which in turn is practiced as a meeting place for women. On one of the walls a mural was painted dedicated to the Mayan goddess Ixchel, a female divinity of the Mayan tradition, representing fertility and abundance. She is considered the goddess of the moon, of love, of gestation, of medicine and of textile works. The representation of Ixchel is a way of dedicating her work to the Great Mother. Under the mural they mounted the altar on a large rectangular wooden table that has various sacred objects, working instruments and sacred offerings that accompany the collective in its various activities both inside and outside this space.

The altar is a moving altar. It is neither fixed nor definitive. It is built with different objects and intentions that the women add to it during the activities carried out. It has the particularity of being collective and itinerant. Some of the objects that make up the altar are used in the workshops for pedagogical purposes.

Every morning before starting the work, Narda is in charge of smoking this space with copal (a kind of incense used by indigenous people in Mexico), to purify the place. A central element of the altar, which was not in place at the time I conducted the interview, is a rod of power that, although part of that altar, is itinerant. The rod represents a foundational moment from when the circle was sown. It is made of an Ayahuasca vine from the women's circle in San Pancho, Nayarit: "it is like a staff of command that passes from woman to woman during the period of a moon (a 28-day cycle corresponding to the menstrual cycle). For the women, more than a staff of command that confers power to a leader (as is the custom in the uses and customs of various indigenous communities), it is the possibility of generating shared leadership, since it rotates, by way of relays, among each of the members of the collective. Each one takes the stick to her personal altar, and assumes the responsibility of caring for, watching over, and summoning the circle during her lunar period. This rotation of the staff also allows the foundational object to move cyclically, according to the 28-day lunar cycles that govern femininity. In this way, the one who has the staff has to call the group together for the full moon ritual. During this ritual, each member places offerings, representing the prayers and intentions of each one, on the altar. For this reason, it is considered a special object because it is charged with the energies of those who participate in the circle. The aim is to foster solidarity among women, freeing them from patriarchal culture, in their own words they tried to build a sorority organization" (Pike 2001; Fedele and Knibbe 2013).

Another element that also travels is the "jefa tambora" (feminine drum boss). It is a community percussion instrument around which they gather to recover traditional songs in native languages. Like the cane, the drum also has different prayers (they are materialized in pieces of ribbons, colored fabrics, bird feathers, snails, etc.) that are placed in the ceremonies. It is loaded with many intentions (it is a tradition taken from the Sioux Lakota rites, which represent the motives or requests to the Great Spirit that are practiced in neopagan Red Path rituals, such as the temazcal or sweat lodge bath).

Other elements placed on the altar are used in their pedagogical activities, through which they sensitize women about their sexuality, their emotions, their

feminine sacredness and their body. One of them is a uterus, colored in Mexican pink, hand-knitted in crochet. It emerged as a pedagogical resource to teach women to know and connect with their uterus. Narda explains that many women, regardless of their age, do not know their female sexual organs. In the pedagogical workshops given by the collective, women take the crocheted uterus in their hands, feel it, and put it in their belly. This experience is healing of emotions, because most of the women keep a lot of pain in the uterus and when they reconnect with it, it causes them strong sensations: crying, screaming, laughing. The uterus looks used and even not very clean, because they have decided not to wash it, because they think that if they did, “all the hands that have touched it would be lost and it would be like taking away its power, because the traces of all those hands and all those energies of the women who have already had it here in their little hands would be lost. The tears would be gone, the snot and with it the emotional burdens. It is that he is charged with the energy of those contacts.”

There is also a shell there, which was donated the first day the altar was set up by a companion. This seashell: “is the oldest one, it is the one that has gone everywhere.” It symbolizes water: “it is the Mother Sea, and we use it to hold the things that burn: the sacred medicines such as copal and incense that when lit generate their fumes. It’s like a way of having the unification of water and fire, isn’t it?”

Another central object on the altar that consecrates feminine spirituality is a vulva made of carved wood. For the circle of women, it “represents the vaginal opening. This is the space of the clitoris; these are the inner and outer lips.” When her friend made it, she gave it to the group as an object for the altar “a sacred object, one of those that are not touched. But as we were setting up the altars of our workshops, as we had no other materials to talk to them about the vulva in their anatomy, we thought of raising the sacred object and telling them to look at this one from above, this hole is the clitoris.” Part of the activities of the circle is to teach women to know their own body and especially their female sexual organs and their functions: “not only from a reproductive function but primarily from a loving one.”

They have also placed an incense burner called a “popochcomil” (incense bowl in nahuatl), with which they work with the smoke in the ritual cleanings. They consider it a feminine instrument because it is the way in which women work with fire to transform the energy of the spaces: “when one carries the fire here, one carries the resin, the herbs... it is with an intention, an intention to clean the place, to honor, to invoke, to drive away the bad spirits.”

Most of the figures placed on the altar represent fertility and feminine qualities, there are sculptures, clay bowls, little pots. A rattle is the instrument with which they sing about fertility. A Tibetan rosary was placed there so that it “embraces so many world views, so many colors, because in the end that’s why we bet on the work we do, to be able to expand it.”

For example, some small sculptures of women are considered the “Pachamamitas” (diminutive of the Inca Mother Earth): “they are recitations, this is a prayer for life, this is a prayer for duality, for the family, and this is a prayer for the first menstrual blood, here you have like a little vessel with your first blood.” They are placed when they perform the transition rituals from childhood to adolescence, which they call transition

rituals. The rituals practiced by women's circles destigmatize sexuality and depathologize menstrual bleeding.

Another important element is the corn cobs, which represent the seeds: "it has an intimate relationship with our body processes and connect that process with the earth process and because there is always corn that we grow on this altar. We always like it red, it evokes our blood to the memory, for which we work so that each woman recovers her knowledge, the wisdom of the body, so that she can have a better management of her health, this for me the personal thing I donated it and it has a very beautiful meaning for what it is."

### **The Altar of the Man of Fire: the Feathers of the Temazcal Medicine Man**

Adrián is a young man from Jalisco who was born into a very Catholic family.<sup>11</sup> He remembers that his grandmother had an altar and lit candles to give light to the dead. He has been running temazcal sweat lodge for 18 years now and this practice made him leave Christianity for good. In fact, in his small bachelor's apartment there is no longer a single Catholic image, although he believes that by lighting candles, he can establish contact with his deceased relatives. In addition, he has recently taken up the discipline of yoga (Shitanga yoga) which he considers to be "a gentle temazcal."

This re-sematization of yoga as a gentle temazcal is understandable because although it is a spiritual seeker who can practice and retake beliefs from different traditions, has found a stronger sense of identification in the pan-Indian movement called Camino Rojo, a spirituality that re-establishes links with the ancestors and with the forces of nature that are experienced in Native American Indian rituals from the United States and Northern Mexico. This movement has become a neo-shamanic initiation movement that is learned in rituals such as the Sun Dance, the temazcal bath (at very high heat), Vision Quest and some sacred chants that make up "a set of ritual practices framed in a cosmivision where the spirits palpitate immanent in the elements of nature (water, wind, fire and earth) integrated in the powerful image of Mother Earth (with vernacular versions of Pachamama and Tonantzin)" (De la Torre and Gutiérrez Zúñiga 2017: 452). While this movement establishes a route to reconnect with the indigenous roots of Mexicanity, it is also a springboard for transnationalization, as these elements circulate in a wide network of practitioners of neo-pagan spiritualities worldwide. Learning is achieved through bodily experimentation. It is therefore not surprising that he combines these elements with other oriental body techniques such as yoga.

This re-sematization of yoga is understood because although he is a spiritual seeker who can practice and retake beliefs from different traditions, he has found a stronger sense of identification in the pan-Indian movement called Camino Rojo, a spirituality that re-establishes links with the ancestors and with the forces of nature that are experienced in Native American Indian rituals from the United States and Northern Mexico. This movement has become a neo-shamanic initiation movement that is learned in rituals such as the Sun Dance, the temazcal bath (at very high heat), Vision

<sup>11</sup> The interview took place in Guadalajara, Mexico, on May 31, 2018.

Quest and some sacred chants that make up “a set of ritual practices framed e n a cosmovision where the spirits palpitate immanent in the elements of nature (water, wind, fire and earth) integrated in the powerful image of Mother Earth (with vernacular versions of Pachamamam and Tonantzin) (De la Torre and Gutiérrez Zúñiga 2018: 452). While this movement establishes a route to reconnect with the indigenous roots of Mexicanity, it is also a springboard for transnationalization, as these elements circulate in a wide network of practitioners of neo-pagan spiritualities worldwide. Learning is achieved through bodily experimentation (experiencing silence, darkness, extreme heat, hunger, exhaustion) that can awaken expanded states of consciousness and that at the same time can have a therapeutic use, which is also offered as a healing therapy market for the body–mind–spirit. However, Red Path (Camino Rojo) is also “a crossroads where indigenous peoples and new age or holistic and alternative spirituality networks converge.” It is therefore not surprising that he combines these elements with other oriental body techniques such as yoga.

He lives in a small apartment located in a multi-family building. He has set aside a space in his living room to set up an altar, where he placed only objects from the East (some figurines of Siddhartha Gapan–Buddha–Ganesha and Shiva). In front of the altar he performs daily meditation and practices his yoga routine. He conditions the small space with incense smoke and is accompanied by Krishnavas for a routine of one hour at the end of the day.

But the main altar is in his bedroom, in a more intimate place. As a headboard, above his bed is a dream catcher and two bird feathers. The dream catcher was made by a craftsman to whom he gave the golden eagle feathers. Some feathers are wing and others are tail feathers. For him, bird wings are special objects: “they are the most exquisite.” He is related to Fred, a medicine man descended from the Rarámuri (or Tarahumara) ethnic community that lives in the mountains of Chihuahua.<sup>12</sup> Fred has been his spiritual guide and teacher as a fire runner for the inipi (temazcal or sweat lodge ritual). Fred grew up in the United States, where he learned the tradition of Sun Dance with the Lakotas, on an Indian reservation in South Dakota. He was a disciple of Leonard Crowdog (a Lakota medicine man), although later each took his own path.<sup>13</sup>

One of the feathers placed at the head of his bed corresponds to the feather that his teacher Fred gave him when he finished his first Promise to the Sun ceremony,<sup>14</sup> which is the ceremony of his spiritual lineage. For this reason, through the feathers Adrián is inscribed in a spiritual lineage and by seeing and feeling them, he can remember many of his teacher Fred’s teachings. In general, the feathers have been obtained through

<sup>12</sup> The Rarámuri are an indigenous community settled in Northern Mexico. This community maintains its own language and customs, its own form of government, a worldview fused with Catholic elements and nature deities (they have as their main god a fusion of Christ with their god, whom they call Onorúame, who made the world and regulates it), they maintain a system of festivals and dances, and are frequented by psychonauts and apprentice shamans because they practice the ritual of the sacred ingestion of peyote.

<sup>13</sup> Lakota tradition chief Leonard Crow Dog (a medicine man) authorized the Sun dance ceremony to be performed in Mexico and established an important ritual exchange with Mexican practitioners since 1982. (Arias Ylerenas 2012).

<sup>14</sup> *Wi Wanyang Wachipi* is the name of the Sun Dance ritual. A Native American ritual of thanksgiving and offering to *Wakantanka* (the Great Spirit). It is performed in summer when the renewal of the life cycle occurs. It is a strenuous ritual. It has a duration of four days with its nights during which one dances without ceasing, in total fasting of water and food. At the end, a skin offering is made (Arias Ylerenas 2012).



donations from medicine men. They are special gifts given to him by his teachers in the form of ritual exchanges.

Feathers are especially important in that tradition because they are the instrument with which they heal: “I have seen such extraordinary things when he uses the feathers.” As the head of his bed, he placed another feather which, without being so striking because of its size, is very beautiful. He explains to me that it is a condor feather, which represents the South, but that it was given to him by a medicine man who works in Germany recovering an ancestral sweat lodge ritual of Bavarian tradition to which he calls the fire of the dragon. The German is also a disciple of Fred. Adrián travels every year to work on his organic ranch.

Adrián can recognize figures in the feathers. In one of them he shows me the face of an old man watching the fire. In addition, he says that feathers have agency as they protect his dreams and visions. For him, feathers have a special power because they are the aids during ceremonies to find their spirits.

In front of his bed he has the small two-story desk he used as a child, which he has converted into another personal altar. The central objects are the bird feathers, although they are accompanied by other personal objects that remind him of his travels, his ceremonial experiences, photographs of his daughter and gifts from family and friends that have sentimental value.

Many of these gifts have symbols related to Mexicanness. On the wall he has a painting given by a fellow Temazcal artist with an image of Quetzalcoatl (a Mesoamerican deity representing the feathered serpent), a Chaac mool (a Mayan deity representing the rain god), and another Mayan figure. He also has a small Huichol painting made of colored stamens that he bought in San Andrés Comihata and that comes from the Wixarrika people.<sup>15</sup> It represents peyote and its guardians. Two snakes that guard the sacred plant.

On one side of the altar is a sacred wand. It is a wooden stick from which two bird feathers hang. For him it has a great meaning because it is the altar’s stick from the first temazcal he ran in Chihuahua.<sup>16</sup> Besides remembering a ceremony where he was initiated as a fire runner, he considers it to have a special energy. The rod is placed on the crescent moon where the fire is made to heat the stones of the temazcal. The crescent is a mound of earth that is made with the stones that were used in the sweat lodge. It is considered “the navel,” and it is there that the rod is made. That rod contains the sacred objects and ritual offerings such as: the snail, the rattles, the tobacco, any other medicine. On the rod go the feathers of those initiated in the promise to the sun. Many followers take the rods used in the ceremonies to consecrate and set up their own traditional altars in their homes. The wand also contains several symbols: five colored

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<sup>15</sup> Many paths on the road of the seekers of neo-Mexicanity lead to the Huicholes or Wixaritari. This ethnic group, and especially its Marakames (medicine men) settled in Western Mexico, represents the authentic or pure Indian because it is a group that has lived in relative isolation and throughout its history has managed to maintain its own organization, customs and cosmology linked to nature. Also, the fact that their tradition includes the peyote ritual is an attraction for psychonauts and seekers of shamanic learning, which is why the Huichol path has even been developed (Aguilar Ros 2012).

<sup>16</sup> Temazcal or sweat lodge baths are now available as a cultural good, a body technique and therapy within the vast global offering of alternative spirituality and as a neoshaman ritual in networks of neo-Indian spirituality. Like yoga or Eastern meditation, the steam bath has become “a sacred rite of initiation in Red Path and Mexicanity networks, two neopagan spiritual movements that promote different ways of rediscovering and reconnecting with nature and nativism” (De la Torre & Gutiérrez Zúñiga 2018: 24).

ribbons that symbolize the cardinal directions. Below them are the feathers, but in a hierarchical order: The feather that is up to the top is the tail of a golden eagle, that is my feather of promise; below it is a feather that reminds us of the fasting ceremony, and another one about the ceremonial warriors, as those who pass the test of resisting a too hot *temazcal* are called. This test is performed to belong to the clan led by Fred: “the ceremony must be repeated. I did that in 2000... I don’t remember if it was on the 12th or the 14th. And then when you manage to do that you have a stronger responsibility, because you must provide the ceremony. You have to carry the firewood, you have to carry the canvases, the *copal*, everything.”

On the altar he also has a feather that he calls medicine. It is a feather with healing powers. Adrián explains to me that he doesn’t know how to use it yet, but he thinks that in the future, when he has learned to be a medicine man, he will be able to heal with the feather.

## Conclusions

The new heterodox spiritualities are also heterogeneous. Their markedly autonomous character (as defined by Heelas and Carozzi) makes the domestic space the location for daily religious experimentation. In this modality, the sources of transcendence are outside the sacred books, the consecration rituals are outside the temples, and the experiences of reconnection with invisible forces and powers are lived in the day to day. Much has been said about the individuation feature of contemporary spiritualities based on a *la carte*, do-it-yourself menus, but little has been said about domestic everyday life spirituality. This study shows that spiritualities are not only celebrated in key ceremonies where spiritual tribes converge, nor do they stay in courses and workshops with gurus and great masters, nor are they confined to festivals of spiritual communities; but they are fit to be practiced anywhere, especially in your home environment. For this reason, I propose that the altars can be considered as the material support of daily spirituality.

Another contribution of this study was to show the material experience of spirituality. When one speaks of spirituality, one relates it to the inner, the invisible and the untouchable. Spirituality is synonym of the soul and essence of things. In this article, the attention to the material life of things shows us that the practitioners of spirituality do not correspond with this dual idea that divides the spiritual from the material. On the contrary, they all share a holistic conception of the mind–body–soul relationship; but they are also people who in their trajectory of study and reconnection with sources of alternative spiritualities to the established religions have experienced an ontological turn to conceive that objects are materialities charged with spirit, energies, and powers. Most of these objects are practiced for holistic physical, emotional, and psychological healing. The altars show us that spiritual seekers not only incorporate narratives from different traditions to build their own but they are also scavengers of objects and materialities with which they assemble their own altars to practice a daily ritual according to their needs.

Whether they are neo-shamans, neo-esoterics, neo-Indians, neo-pagans, naturalists, or practice a feminine spirituality they experience a daily spirituality in practices located in

their own domestic altars, these are small physical assemblies that allow ritualizing and experiencing self-spiritualities in daily life. However, as Carozzi (1999) describes, although the altars represent a synthesis of the personal search for their own spirituality, many objects have a special or sacred value and meaning because they were donated or acquired in spaces of ritualization (initiation ceremonies, workshops, courses) through which they circulate and from which they take their elements. Therefore, the altar offers an autobiographical narrative of its positioning in circuits. In fact, in each of the altars there is an object that refers to their initiation or certification as ritual specialists. On the other hand, the accumulated personal experience turned into their own DIY is a learning process that not only impacts the way they live their spirituality on a daily basis but is continuously transformed into a therapeutic offer, reconverting their knowledge into an offer that is reinscribed in the therapeutic circuits and becomes a means of sustenance. Home altars encourage the generation of creative, changing, and unfinished narratives (Morello 2019).

Spiritual altars are vastly different from the altars of the Catholic tradition around figures of miraculous saints who personify the gods. Nor are they made around deities as is the case in traditional, misnamed primitive cultures. The objects present are links with the transcendent because their very nature imprints them with competition. They are not only there to evoke meanings and values, nor to remember, but especially to provoke states of mind and transform bodily discomfort.

The materialities are a link with the body. Around the altars embodied religious practices are developed (McGuire 2016) and the objects generate emotions, corporal sensations, states of mind, dreams, visions and senses to reconnect with disintegrated communities, but they also transmit spiritual meanings, and above all they are generators of physical senses that are lived in individual bodies, but that “are socially shaped, trained, and changed” (McGuire 2016: 155). For example, the wings of eagles and condors are related to their natural function associated with the flight of birds; plants, stones, essences, resins, aromas, and oils are not symbols but have chemical healing and sensory properties (they generate moods and are perceived with the senses). Nevertheless, it is important to take up again Marc Augé’s advice when he says: “To try to understand the reality of the pagan God, without denying the evidence, it is necessary to apprehend him successively as symbols, as body, as matter and as word” (Augé 1988: 29).

These four elements are clearly intertwined in the case of Ignacio the Gestalt-shaman therapist who asks permission from the saints and oriental figures whom he practices as mediators between the invisible and visible worlds. He uses incense to transform aromatically the environment and purify it; he uses stones by recognizing their magnetic properties able to heal the body, remove pains and de-stress the mind of the patient. But he also articulates the symbols (an object representing another object) considered as archetypes that condense secret powers (as shown in the Masonic symbol of the dollar bills that activate his altar of money).

But it is not the same in every case. For instance, in the case of the apprentice medicine man, there are no gods or figures that incarnate deities. The objects that link with the transcendent are related to their facets of shamanic initiation, and these are mainly the feathers of eagles and condors that guide journeys and lead dreams and visions, and that in the future will be their tools of healing.

The case of the altar of the feminine collective is different since all the objects are manufactured and although they have a value as natural symbols insofar as they represent some aspect or organ of femininity (e.g., the uterus or the menstrual cycles), they are also charged with a ritual resemantization capable of transmitting new sensations and reconnecting with their own inner body. An example of this is the crochet uterus that is like a sponge that collects emotions, maintains them and can transmit them to those women who place it in their womb. It is an object charged with the emotions it has provoked, which are transformed into energies of emotional healing.

Nor is the way of conceptualizing the agency of objects the same in each of the cases presented. The first case resorts to a kind of magic alchemy. The second case considers that the objects possess the spirit of the plants, animals, or traditions from which they come and that they are therefore transmitters of sensations and powers. The third case resorts to renaming the objects in the feminine gender (“la jefa tambora,” “la colectiva,” “The Seashell God”) to transform them into feminized artifacts that when touched generate embodied practices. The rituals are resymbolized in lunar cycles that correspond to menstrual cycles and contribute to decolonizing the patriarchal meanings that have controlled the female sexual organs and have imposed vertical relationships that must be replaced by sorority relationships (Ramírez Morales 2019).

They are materialities that seem to absorb a series of facts that refer to preserve, materialize, and make visible that which is not physically present, but that is spiritually present through the materiality of the objects.

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